DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 915 CG 019 419

AUTHOR Elmore, L. JoAnne
TITLE The Teacher and the Child of Divorce.
PUB DATE [Sep 86]
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Families Alive Conference (7th, Ogden, UT, September 10-12, 1986).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Children; *Coping; *Divorce; Elementary Secondary Education; *Helping Relationship; School Role; *Social Support Groups; Stress Management; Stress Variables; *Student Problems; Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

It is important for teachers to produce a comfortable learning climate for students whose parents are divorcing. Research has shown that divorce precipitates a major crisis in the lives of most children and that the stress which accompanies divorce often affects school behavior and academic performance. Children at different ages react differently to divorce. Primary grade children appear to have more difficulty dealing with divorce than do older children. Stages from the Kubler-Ross grief model of death which have been applied to children of divorce are anger, depression, guilt, fear, and relief. Teachers need to understand the effects of temporary and prolonged stress on children, and to be supportive in the classroom. Teachers must be patient, be willing listeners, and avoid using terms in the classroom that may be offensive to children of divorce. Teachers should not expect failure from children whose parents are divorcing, nor should they expect these children to be totally unchanged. Close communication between parents and teachers is essential and teachers should encourage parents to inform the school of major changes at home. The extent to which children in crisis can turn to the school for support depends on the school system and the extent to which programs exist for assistance. By increasing their sensitivity to children of divorce, teachers and administrative personnel can offer these children help and support through a difficult family transition. (NB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
L. JoAnne Elmore
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED274915

CG 019419

THE TEACHER AND THE CHILD OF DIVORCE

by L. JoAnne Elmore

The family unit has long been considered the main source of development of social, emotional and cultural experience for the child. The responsibility for the nurturing, values clarification, and other needs of children has been centered in traditional family life. In recent years, however, this mainstay of socieity has been in a state of transition which has changed the concept and definition of families. No longer can the family be defined as father, mother and children as the only existing alternative. The conventional idea of the family unit has been broadened to include all combinations of family members.

In 1978, an estimated 6.3 million families in the United States were classified as one-parent families. Single-parent families are those headed by one parent, and deal with inherently unique problems. Single-parent families increased by about one million between 1960-70, and by nearly two million since then. At the same time, the national birth rate diminished from about a twelve percent increase during the 1960-70 decade, to five percent between 1970-78, thus causing a disproportional growth in families classified as one-parent families. (Norton, 1979)

With the changes in American family life, it is even more important for classroom teachers to possess attitudes and skills which will produce a comfortable learning climate for those students whose families are in transition.

Single-parent families are comprised of individuals, and although each divorce is as individual as the people involved, certain common behaviors and feelings have been noted and some generalizations have been made concerning children of divorce. It is necessary for the classroom teacher to be cognizant of these common attitudes and feelings in order to gain a base of understanding for the problems which the child of divorce is facing.

This inquiry has attempted to pinpoint, through a review of available literature, those common feelings, reactions, and experiences of children of separated families and to identify specific techniques, attitudes and skills which will help the classroom teacher to deal effectively with the child in stress because of divorce. Further, the attempt will be made to identify the role of the school administration in helping children deal with divorce, and to determine what help the administration can give teachers and families in fulfilling this role.

FAMILIES IN STRESS

J. M. Hammond, reporting her study of self-concept, academic achievement and attitudes of divorced children in the Elementary School Journal, makes the following powerful statement: "Studies predict that 50 percent of the children born in 1978 will live a portion of their lives before the age of eighteen in single-parent homes." (Hammond, 1979, p.55). These children face the negative attitudes and expectations of society in general and of many of the adults in their everyday lives.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In a study by Santrock in 1978, it was found that, "...teachers rated the divorced child more negatively on the following three variables reflecting affective state or relations: happiness, emotional adjustment, and coping with stress." (Santrock, 1978,p.755). Adding to this, the many changes which often come from the divorce itself, the child will rarely escape some degree of stress. Although attitudes may be changing toward families involved in divorce, change is often slow in society and acceptance may not be complete. In a study done in 1974 of the social situation of divorced mothers and their families, Brandwein, Brown and Fox concluded: "There are expectations of neighbors, schools and courts that children from broken homes will not be properly disciplined, will have sex role confusion, and will be more likely to get into trouble." (Brandewein, Brown & Fox, 1974, p.502).

In the six months to one year following the separation, there seems to be turmoil of various sorts. Certainly one of the most obvious causes of this turmoil is the emotional upheaval of the family members. The feelings of disruption, agony, insecurity, guilt, isolation, and a feeling of being different are prevalent. In the midst of all of these feelings is the physical and logistical changes. Often the family will be forced to move to a more affordable home because the income for one family is now required to support two households. Often in this case, mothers who previously stayed at home are forced to seek employment outside the home. In many cases the mother's income falls far short of meeting even minimal expenses, thus causing further stress on the family.

PORTRAIT OF THE CHILD OF DIVORCE

Reactions to divorce are as varied as the children involved so there can be no simple answer for recognizing divorce-related behavior in the classroom. According to Bernard, the child will react to what he understands, or misunderstands, about the divorce. (Bernard,1978).

Two well-respected researchers in the field of children and divorce are Joan B. Kelly and Judith S. Wallerstein, clinical psychologists and investigators of the Children of Divorce Project at the Marin Community Mental Health Center in Greenbrae, California. Their research has confirmed that divorce precipitates a major crisis in the lives of most children and that the stress engendered by the crisis often spills over into the academic area. In the early 1970's, Kelly and Wallerstein conducted a five-year study of sixty Northern California families experiencing divorce. A group of one hundred thirty-one children, aged three to eighteen were studied at the time of the marital separation. The children were predominantly white middle class, and with two exceptions, lived with their mothers following the divorce. With few exceptions, the children in the study found the divorce of their parents to be very stressful, and fewer than ten percent were relieved by the divorce decision, even when the conflict they had been exposed to in the home was intense.

This same study found no single indicator of stress could be identified, although the children did share certain common

feelings and concerns which overflowed into classroom behaviors. The first reactions of many family members were shock, disbelief, anxiety, and fear. The youngster's fears were many, but two recurring concerns were evident: 1. Who will take care of me? and 2. Will my relationship with both parents last? Children in kindergarten and first grade were more concerned with the basic caretaking issues such as food, clothing, housing, etc. They also expressed concern of being abandoned and of losing the love of parents. As they watched the marital relationship disolve, they concluded that the partnt-child reelationship could also be threatened.

While families are going through the process of divorce, parents are also subject to a great deal of stress. Often, while the terms of the divorce are being negotiated, adults are forced to deal with many new situations and responsibilities. During this period, many children receive less attention from parents, which causes distress on the part of the children. At a time when the children need more sensitivity and quality attention from the parents, often the parents are involved with their own increased problems and have less energy to deal with the concerns of their children. If the mother is late coming home from work, the child sometimes becomes fearful that she is not coming back.

It was noted that children in the primary grades, ages seven to nine have more difficulty dealing with divorce than do older children. Since intellectual development is not complete at this age, their coping ability is limited. It was found that older children greatly benefit by "talking out" feelings and situations, however, younger children will not benefit from talking alone. Other strategies are needed. The researchers suggested that supportive adults work with the child's environment to help with adjustments to emotional reactions following the divorce. Older children, while upset by events of the divorce, continue to function both at home and at school with a minimum of disruptive behavior in most cases. But again, this seems to depend on individual circumstances at home. Students of above-average intelligence and autonomy continue to function without much outward evidence of struggle. They often feel intense personal conflicts that are not necessarily evident to their teachers. Some of the older students, on the other hand, are more able to see the logic of the divorce when the parents are obviously unhappy. They also are more established in social relationships and nourishing academic achievements. These are some of the psychologically healthier youngsters in the study. (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1979).

COMMON EMOTIONS

Reporting in Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, J. M. Bernard of Purdue University, studied the appropriateness of the Kubler-Ross grief model of death for children of divorce. Kubler-Ross identifies the following emotions or stages associated with death which Bernard applies to divorce: Anger, depression, guilt, fear, and relief. She states that there is no reason to assume that a child will systematically progress through all the grief stages or that a child who is not

expressing strong reactive emotions is hiding something. Adults should attempt to discover what feelings the child is experiencing, acknowledge the feelings, and help the child to talk through the feelings and help him to diminish the negative emotions and increase positive reactions.

Since parents often exhibit anger during the divorce period, it is not surprising that children may have the same reaction. An increase in hostility and agressive behavior was observed in children of all ages. Increased irritability, out-bursts of temper, and confrontations with siblings and peers were evident in younger school-aged children. Since anger is highly visible, and likely to present problems in the classroom, it is a more obvious emotion and becomes more of a problem for the classroom teacher.

Depression is sometimes overlooked since it is not usually disruptive in the classroom and is more passive. The sadness and yearning during the first few months following the separation may go unobserved by the teacher. Some youngsters show their depression through restlessness, deep sighing, difficulties in concentration, and a severe narrowing of their interests and creativity. They also express various physical complaints. Often the child will feel that she is powerless in reaching the absent parent. Providing the child with the telephone number of the absent parent will help her feel that she is still in contact with him.

It was observed in this study that the irrational guilt sometimes felt by a child colored his behavior. Because children move from a self-centered concept of their world, to a more general realization that they do not control everything that happens, they can feel that they are responsible for the parent leaving. Often these fears will go unexpressed because children feel that by verbalizing the fear, it will make it more real. The fears of children of divorce are more apparent in the younger children of pre-school and primary grades. Older children, however, express fears of having to move and leave friends, and are often more aware of the financial pressures of the family. The study observed that some children, although not as many, felt relief when the divorce finally came to a conclusion. In such cases, the conflict in the home was so distressing to the child, that it was a relief to have the battles end. (Bernard, 1978).

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

In the past, a divorce in the family was a failure to be hidden--a negative social stigma for all involved. Although this is still true to a certain extent, the teacher needs to broaden his attitudes toward children of divorce. "Patience, understanding and support should be the key." (Hammond, 1981,p.83). Kelly and Wallerstein believe that the education of teachers should include a more comprehensive, complex view of the psychological development of children, including the effects of both temporary and prolonged stress. Since about two-thirds of the children involved in divorce showed some visible signs of change in behavior in school, it is to the benefit of all concerned if the teacher is willing to be supportive. (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1979).

Teachers should be informed of major changes at home, but in the absence of this information, may have to rely on their own instincts and past experience with the child's previous behavior and the behavior of other children in similar circumstances. Hammond states that teachers should not expeact failure from children whose parents are divorced. Her research has shown: "On several measures--reading and math achievement, self-concept, immaturity, withdrawal, and peer relations, there were no significant differences between children from divorced and intact families." (Hammond,1979,p.60). At the same time, the teacher should not expect the child to be totally without change or reaction. The child should be given time to work through a myriad of feelings and changes. The teacher should aim for a balance that will allow the child latitude and a feeling of support, while not allowing destructive or disruptive behavior to become a pattern. Children seem to respond to stress within the framework of thier own internal timetables, so patience is essential.

Long states:

> There is a need for a systematic program providing a series of steps to equip the teacher with the skills necessary to communicate respect, genuineness and understanding to the student. Such a program should focus on the communications of helpful responses, with special attention to four basic areas: non-verbal attending, listening, responding, and personal problem solving. (Long, 1979,p.29).

Hammond suggested that the teacher should be sensitive to the language used and should avoid familial stereotypes. Teachers should be concious of, and avoid using, negative-sounding terms such as "broken home" and references to "your mom and dad". When children make presents to be sent home, those children with "two dads" should not be asked to make a decision as to which person will receive the present. Duplicates can be made and sent home.

The teacher can be a willing and accepting listener, without making judgements or prying into personal matters. Research has stated that out of eighty-two children studied, the majority ranked "letting students talk about their feelings" as the most helpful thing a teacher could do for them. (Hammond,1981). Social studies units provide an opportunity to discuss single-parent families. The use of bibliotherapy can be helpful and the teacher should be sure the class or school library contains a variety of books on the subject of divorce. The teacher can then guide the child to these books which are available.

Close communication with parents is essenatial in dealing with all children, but especially so in the case of divorced children. Teachers can encourage parents to inform the school of any major changes at home. Bernard identifies the following suggestions for teachers in dealing with parents and children of divorce: First, examine the parameters of the individual divorce and child. As has been previously stated, each child and divorce is different. Some children are subjected to more conflict and stress than others. They will have different experiences and

will receive all levels of support or nonsupport from home. If the teacher has some idea of these circumstances, he can take a more realistic approach toward dealing with the child. He can attempt to discover what the child understands about the divorce, and acknowledge the feelings the child is having. Talking with the child, and letting her express and work through negative feelings will be of immense benefit to the child. Finally, Bernard suggests that working with the child's environment is helpful, expecially with primary grade children, in assisting them through the various stages of grief. Books, social studies units, and a list of the child's interests, to use when she becomes depressed and lethargic, is helpful. (Bernard,1978).

The teacher needs to recognize the strengths identified by Boyer,(1979) including a highly developed sense of exploring feelings, the ability to evaluate and understand relationships, and skills in managing conflict and mastering disappointment, are apparent in some children of divorce. Many will be more willing and able to assume responsibility than their nondivorced counterparts, and will sometimes show a good sense of independence and resilience.

THE SCHOOL AS A SUPPORT SYSTEM

The school is useful because it provides structure in the lives of children when the major structure of life, the family, is falling apart. The extent to which children in crisis can turn to the school for a network of support is dependent upon the school system itself, and to what extent programs have been set up for assistance.

Rubin has noted:

> The school has enormous potential for aiding children of divorce using group activities to facilitate emotional sharing between children in similar circumstances. Emphasis on communication, interpersonal relationships and self-esteem are essential for all children in helping them to realize their potential and to be able to form satisfying and positive relationships throughout their lives. Education in family life, parenting and interpersonal relationships are especially necessary for the children of divorce who are at greater risk for marital disruption in their own lives. (Rubin, 1979,p.554).

Some successful programs are using the physical facilities of the school for after-school care of children up to twelve years of age. They have incorporated town or city recreation workers and activities, charge a sliding scale fee, and use the school's bus system to bring the youngsters to a central location. Adult education programs have provided useful information and support to parents who themselves may be having difficulty adjusting to their new situation. There is much to know and understand about divorce-engendered behaviors and feelings, and the educational system is an ideal one for providing support for divorced parents and children.

Basic changes are needed in curriculum and attitude. Kelly and Wallerstein state: "With more than one million children and adolescents experiencing divorce each year, it is time to formally acknowledge the widespread existence of the divorced

family:" (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1979,p.52). The devotion of curriculum materials to the two-parent intact family has contributed to the sense of aloneness and differentness of many children. Acknowledging and discussing the many variants of family life which now exists in such dramatic proportions in our country, such as one-parent, and reconstituted families, as well as intact and extended families will add to the security of the child with his own particular family structure. The sheer force of numbers of students involved with this problem suggest a need for a change which will also provide a more realistic view for those whose families are not separated.

School districts, teachers, and parents can work in the community to provide a greater understanding of the children of divorce and possibly reduce some of the negative attitudes toward families of divorce. One of the major concerns of a study by Brandwein, Brown and Fox, was that single parents were not recognized as the authority figure in the family. (Brandwein, Brown & Fox, 1974). Since this study in 1974, it is likely that this attitude has been changed to a certain degree because of an increased awareness of the problem by the public. Schools should be a major influence in recognizing the authority of the custodial parent.

School districts can bring information to teachers who are dealing with children in stress on a day-to-day basis. Inservice workshops are needed to promote the human relations skills mentioned by Long. Training is also needed by teachers in recognizing the common emotions and experiences of children of divorce, and techniques need to be acquired by teachers in dealing with the behavior exhibited in the classroom. The techniques can be learned in workshops provided by the district.

Because of the social changes and needs of the family, the teacher is in a key position in dealing with children of divorce. This role has been thrust upon her with very little training, and often she is handicapped by previous misconceptions and a lack of understanding. Since children experiencae similar emotions and experiences, these can be used as a base of understanding by the teacher. Research can also be helpful in identifying and focusing on behavior of children in stress. These findings can then be applied in the classroom.

The teacher and administration can increase their sensitivity to the child of divorce. Through an expanded definition of the family in curriculum materials and elimination of negative terminology, the child can be spared some of the trauma of the divorce by making the school atmosphere more comfortable and accepting. Terms such as "broken home" can be changed to "single-parent families", and "fatherless children" can be replaced with such terms as "children with absent fathers". School facilities can be used to ease the burden of families involved in divorce, and respect can be given to those individuals involved in the situation. Through community programs, the public can be educated about the conditions of these families, and social stigma decreased.

Rather than leaving the classroom teacher to "sink or swim",

and children of divorce to flounder, resources can be provided to benefit the suffering child and ease the burden of the teacher.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bernard, Janine M. Divorce and young children: Relationships in transition. Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, Feb., 1978 12 pp.188-197.

Brandwein, R. A.,Brown, C. A., & Fox, E. M. Women and children last: The social situation of divorced mothers and their families. Journal of Marriage & the Family, 1974, 36, pp.498-514.

Boyer, Sherry Tips for working with single parents. Instructor, Sept.,1979 89 p. 79.

Green, B. J. Helping children of divorce: A multi-modal approach Elementary School Guidance & Counseling, Oct.,1979 13 pp.30-45.

Hammond, J. M. Children, divorce and you Learning, Feb.,1981 9, p.83.

Hammond, J. M. Children of divorce: A study of self-concept, academic achievement and attitudes Elementary School Journal, Nov.,1979 80, pp.54-62.

Kelly, Joan B., & Wallerstein, Judith S. Children of divorce The National Elementary Principal, Oct.,1979 59 p.51.

Long, L. Human relations training: Goals and strategies Journal of Teacher Education Nov.-Dec.,1979 30 pp.29-32.

Norton, Arthur J. A portrait of the one-parent family The National Elementary Principal, Oct.,1979 59 pp.32-36.

Rubin, L. D., & Price, J. H. Divorce and its effects on children Journal of School Health, Dec., 1979 49 pp.554-556.

Santrock, J. W., & Tracy, R. L. Effects of children's family structure status on the development of stereotypes by teachers Journal of Educational Psychology, Oct.,1978 70 pp.754-757.

RELATED REFERENCES

Bane, Mary Jo Marital disruption and the lives of children Journal of Social Issues, 1976 32 (1) p.103.

Black, K. N. What about the child from the one-parent home? Teacher, Jan.,1979 96 pp.24-26.

Hammond, J. M. A comparison of elementary children from divorced and intact families Phi Delta Kappan, Nov.,1979 61 (3) p.219.

Hammond, J. M. Children of divorce: Implications for counselors School Counselor, Sept.,1979 27 pp.7-14 bib..

Hozman, Thomas L.,& Froiland, Donald J. Children, forgotten in divorce Personnel & Guidance Journal, May, 1977 p.550.

Isakson, Richard L. Whatever happened to the Waltons? Instructor, Sept.,1979 89 p.78.

Jenkins, S. Children of divorce Today, Mar.-Apr., 1978 7 pp. 16-20 bib. ill..

Kelly, Joan B., & Wallerstein, Judith S. Brief interventions with children in divorcing families American Journal of Orthopsychiatrist, Jan.,1977 47 pp.23-39.

Kohn,S. D. Coping with family change The National Elementary Principal, Oct.,1979 59 pp.41-50.

Main, M. H. Most terrible moment Teacher, Jan.,1979 96 pp.66-7 ill..

Raschke, H. J. & Raschke, V. J. Familily conflict and childrens' self-concept: A comparison of intact and single-parent families Journal of Marriage & the Family, May, 1979 41 (2) pp.367-74.

Ricci, I. Divorce, remarriage and the schools Phi Delta Kappan, Mar.,1979 60 pp.509-11.

Stoffer, D. L. Investigation of positive behavioral change as a function of genuineness, non-possessive warmth and empathetic understanding Journal of Educational Research, Jan.,1970 63 pp.63-71.

Tucker, B. Z.,& Bernstein, A. J. Child, school, family: An interactional view Journal of Education, Spr., 1979 161 (1) pp.71-88.

Uslander, A. S. Dick lives with Dad, Jane lives with Mom, so who gets Spot? Instructor, Sept.,1979 89 p.78.

REFERENCES FOR CHILDREN

Adler, Carol S. The Silver Coach New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan 1979.

Blue, Rose A Month of Sundays New York: F. Watts Co. 1972 ill. .

Blume, Judy It's Not the End of the World New York: Bradbury Press 1972.

Corcoran, Barbara Hey, That's My Soul You're Stomping On! New York: Antheneum 1978.

Dexter, Pat Egan Arrow in the Wind Nashville: T. Nelson Co. 1978.

Goff, Beth Where is Daddy?: The Story of a Divorce Boston: Beacon Press 1969 ill..